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Keywords

Vladimir Nabokov, Despair, Bend Sinister, Consciousness, Symbolism, unreliable narrator

Vladimir Nabokov's Singular Nature of Reality:
A Close Reading of *Despair* and *Bend Sinister*

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In *Despair* and *Bend Sinister*, Vladimir Nabokov utilizes various literary and narrative devices to study consciousness. Symbolism, unreliable narrators, and artifice present a literary reality that invites the readers to observe how each character's consciousness builds the world it perceives. We are also exposed to different consciousness' imperfections through which we are encouraged to reflect on our own mental and psychological inclinations. In the end, Nabokov points to the entirely individualistic and subjective nature of truth and suggests that we might never objectively know

Truth or Reality because everything we know and perceive is filtered through a biased mind. Instead, he stresses the importance of being aware of the necessarily unique way everyone perceives the world.

In *Despair*, mirrors symbolize the distorted way consciousness often perceives and interprets the world. “For Nabokov,” Ellen Pifer comments, “the world is not an objective entity but a universe embraced by consciousness” (127). In other words, reality does not exist apart from the mind that encounters it, and Nabokov compares consciousness to a mirror because the world we perceive is reflective of our inner world just as a mirror merely reflects what is before it. A distorted consciousness, like a colored mirror, produces a misrepresented version of reality that is colored by certain beliefs, emotions, and prejudices. Mirrors also don’t change shape unless shattered; comparing our mind to a mirror thus attests to our consciousness’ stubbornness as well.

Within the novel, Hermann’s consciousness is colored by his unwavering belief that he has found his doppelgänger, and this causes Hermann to see the world entirely differently from everyone else. It is interesting to note that he dislikes mirrors. “Now that is a word I loathe, that ghastly thing!” exclaims Hermann, and he even writes that “the merely mention of it has just given [him] a nasty shock” (*Despair* 27). Instead of seeing himself and the world as it really is, he relies on his own mind which repeatedly produces false doubles. Colored by his belief in a doppelgänger, Hermann imagines Felix to be his mirror image when really it is only

his consciousness reflecting distorted images: “for some ten seconds we kept looking into each other’s eyes. Slowly I raised my right arm, but his left did not rise, as I had almost expected to do. I closed my left eye, but both his eyes remained open” (*Despair* 20). When he does encounter a true mirror, Hermann convinces himself that the reflection he sees is not himself, but Felix: “when at last I got back to my hotel room, I found there, amid mercurial shadows and framed in frizzly bronze, Felix awaiting me. Pale-faced and solemn he drew near. He was now well-shaven” (*Despair* 22).

Hermann’s repeated denial of Felix’s uniqueness dramatizes the subjective nature of reality in *Despair*. We see that Hermann had been aware of their physical differences from the beginning:

I possess large yellowish teeth; his are whiter and set more closely together, but is that really important? On my forehead a vein stands out like a capital M imperfectly drawn, but when I sleep my brow is as smooth as that of my double. And those ears... the convolutions of his are but very slightly altered in comparison with mine: here more compressed, there smoothed out. We have eyes of the same shape, narrowly slit with sparse lashes, but his iris is paler than mine. (*Despair* 24)

Though he himself observes certain facial differences, Hermann insists that they are the same person. Again and again he considers the possibility that Felix might not be his double—“who knows, maybe he was not the least

like me after all” — but Hermann always returns to his original disposition (*Despair* 88). His ability to perceive Felix as his double while contrary evidence abound shows that “every item perceived by Nabokov’s narrators and protagonists similarly acts as a mirror of the observation of consciousness” (Pifer 127). In other words, what Hermann sees and fails to see are not indicative of what his sensory abilities are capable of, but what his consciousness is desirous of. This is why Hermann’s use of the phrase “to my eyes” is so important because it was his desire to see a doppelgänger that his eyes responded to (*Despair* 21).

Hermann believing Felix to be his identical twin is not an isolated, one-time mistake because we see that his consciousness idealizes doubles and produces them over and over again. When travelling through a foreign town to meet Felix again, Hermann comes across what he takes to be one of Ardalion’s pictures and asks the store owner how she came to attain it. When she replies that her niece painted it, Hermann thinks “[W]ell, I’m damned! For had I not seen something very similar, if not identical, among Ardalion’s pictures?” (*Despair* 65) However, Hermann later discovers that the painting’s subjects are “not quite two roses and not quite a pipe, but a couple of large peaches and a glass ashtray” (*Despair* 93). Similarly, Hermann is prone to thinking that every face looks, more or less, the same. When Ardalion asserts that “every face is unique,” Hermann retorts “Well, now, really—unique! ... Isn’t that going too far? Take for instance the definite types of human faces that exist in the world; say, zoological types. There are

people with the features of apes; there is also the rat type, the swine type. Then take the resemblance to celebrities..." (*Despair* 43). Instead of perceiving individual differences in people, Hermann is busy categorizing. When he shares that he "longed passionately for [Ardalion] to start talking about doubles," we observe that mirror image is a deep-rooted obsession with Hermann—a tint to his mirror of consciousness (*Despair* 43).

In addition to mirror symbolisms, Nabokov also employs an unreliable narrator to further suggest that consciousness is often misleading. In the introduction of *Despair*, Nabokov calls Hermann, our lying and exaggerating narrator, a "neurotic scoundrel" (*Despair* 11). From the very first sentence of the novel we can see Hermann's inconsistent personality: "If I were not perfectly sure of my power to write and of my marvelous ability to express ideas with the utmost grace and vividness... So, more or less, I had thought of beginning of my tale" (*Despair* 13). The sentence lacks the "utmost grace" and logic that Hermann professes to possess, and the awkward phrases such as "well, as I was saying" and "I think I ought to inform the reader" insinuate that Hermann is not, in fact, perfectly sure of his literary talent (*Despair* 14). We also see that Hermann has no qualms about lying when he confesses, "[T]hat bit about my mother was a deliberate lie [...] I could, of course have crossed it out, but I purposely leave it there as a sample of one of my essential traits: my light-hearted, inspired lying" (*Despair* 14). Lastly, Hermann seems to acknowledge that his writing is imperfect and unreliable because he is writing from

memory:

The pines sought gently, snow lay about, with bald patches of soil showing black. What nonsense! How could there be snow in June? Ought to be crossed out, were it not wicked to erase; for the real author is not I, but my impatient memory. Understand it just as you please; it is none of my business.

(*Despair* 41)

It is particularly insightful for Hermann to have noticed that it is not his being itself narrating but his flawed and biased memory retracing the story. Indeed, it is our unique consciousness that stumbles upon the world to make sense of whatever it encounters. Furthermore, since all minds have different inclinations, bias and errors are to be expected.

Lastly, Nabokov uses humorous cases of extreme situational irony to convey how the folly of our consciousness can be comical at times. To the end Hermann refuses to believe that his “art,” or the foolish murder of Felix, has failed because he and Felix bear no resemblance. Instead, he complains, “[A]ll that disgusting mess is due to the inertia, pigheadedness, prejudice of humans, failing to recognize me in the corpse of my flawless double” (*Despair* 162). Of course, this is extremely ironic because it was precisely this stubborn bias of his mind that led him to his demise. Similarly, when first encountering Felix, Hermann comments that it would only be “the partiality and fallaciousness of human eyesight” that would lead others to miss their resemblance (*Despair* 19). Through these comically ironic situations, Nabokov comments on the

inherent difficulty consciousness faces in becoming aware of its own limitations.

If mirrors in *Despair* express consciousness' tendency to project whatever is already within itself, liquids in *Bend Sinister* reflect consciousness' fluid nature. The motif of liquid blots reoccurs throughout the novel. The very first scene in the book contains an oblong puddle, and the subsequent chapter takes place over a bridge where Krug feels "an intimate connection with the black lacquered water lapping and heaving under the stone arches of the bridge" (*Bend Sinister* 14). Here, the black "heaving" water seems to reflect Krug's own self, a gloomy man who had been crying and struggling. The liquid imagery returns again when Dr. Alexander's pen bleeds ink and Krug sees the ink blot, "a fancy footprint or the spatulate outline of a puddle" (*Bend Sinister* 50). Lastly, Skotoma, the founder of Ekwilism, makes explicit the comparison between human consciousness, liquid, and container:

Human beings, he said, were so many vessels containing unequal portions of this essentially uniform consciousness. It was, however, quite possible, he maintained, to regulate the capacity of the human vessels [...] either by grading the contents or by eliminating the fancy vessels and adopting a standard size. (*Bend Sinister* 68)

Because he believed consciousness to be fluid and malleable, Skotoma strove to regulate the shape of consciousness by limiting the "vessels"—people's beliefs, emotions, and expressions.

In Krug's case, everything he experiences is molded according to his prevailing grief, just as everything Hermann sees is colored by his belief in a doppelgänger. Krug asserts in the beginning that "the operation has not been successful and [that his] wife will die" (*Bend Sinister* 6). The despair resulting from this tragic occasion proceeds to affect everything Krug observes. For instance, illusions of Olga flash across Krug's mind while he is crossing the bridge: "Suddenly, with the vividness of a praedormital image or of a bright-robed lady on stained glass, she drifted across his retina, in profile, carrying something[...] and the wall dissolved, the torrent was loosed again" (*Bend Sinister* 13). The ink blot Krug observes from Dr. Alexander's pen takes the shape of a puddle, the first thing Krug observed when looking outside the hospital window after Olga's death. Similarly, when Paduk spills milk by knocking down the tumbler, "what was left of the milk made a kidney-shaped white puddle on the desk" (*Bend Sinister* 132). Kidney failure, of course, was the cause of Olga's death, and the puddle image returns again and again. "The world Krug perceives," Pifer explains, "is a psychic landscape, centered about his own preoccupations and concerns [...]. Everything Krug perceives is transmuted and infused by the grief, the love, the loss he experiences at Olga's death" (81). Thus in *Bend Sinister*, the ever-conforming liquid motif reveals the workings of Krug's consciousness— his affected mind whose perception of the world is conditioned by his despair.

Furthermore, by suggesting that it was Krug's mental state that brought about his own demise, Nabokov

points to the danger of not being aware of the way one's consciousness interprets the world. As an academic, Krug is always trying to reason the world out, and he fails to understand the brutality of the Ekwilist regime simply because he does not perceive its legitimacy. "My dear friend, you know well my esteem for you," President Azureus pleads, "but you are a dreamer, a thinker. You do not realize the circumstances" (*Bend Sinister* 47). Instead of considering the dangers of Paduk's regime, Krug holds onto his stubborn belief that he is somehow untouchable. His obliviousness is a partial result of his childhood memory of bullying Paduk. Krug recalls that "toad was [Paduk's] nickname," confessing that he was "something of a bully" who used to "trip [Paduk] up and sit upon his face" (*Bend Sinister* 46). Krug's heavy reliance on the past manifests itself through his unwillingness to pay the proper respect to Paduk during his interview. Alarmed by Krug's condescending manner, the surrounding guards warn that "this is still not the right manner" and that he "should bear in mind that notwithstanding the narrow and fragile bridge of school memories uniting the two sides, these are separated in depth by an abyss of power and dignity which even a great philosopher cannot hope to measure" (*Bend Sinister* 129). Though he is ordered not to "indulge in this atrocious familiarity," Krug continues to anger Paduk and the guards (*Bend Sinister* 129).

Krug's pride, philosophic tendencies, and apathy make it difficult for Krug to protect himself and David from Paduk's totalitarian government. Indeed, Krug is unable

to foresee David's impending danger despite the obvious hints. Entrenched in his own perception of reality, Krug entirely disregards others' reality—Paduk's and President Azerues', among others—and brings about his own tragic end. Laurie Clancy aptly observes that “although [Nabokov's] sympathies are patently with Krug, the author is nevertheless careful to point out the flaws in Krug's greatness—his arrogance and foolish conviction of his own safety and failure to see how his presence endangers his friends” (96). For instance, though Krug has had the chance to escape the country, he delays for no apparent reason. By blinding Krug to the well-apparent fact that Mariette is a spy, Nabokov exposes how illogical our minds can be when we are insistent upon our own reality. The able reader is quick to pick up on Marietta's suspicious motives given that she had worked for a well-known artist until he suddenly was sent to a prison camp, not to mention that she randomly shows up at Krug's door. Even Krug's intuition seems to respond to these hints when he comments that “there was something rather irritating about her,” but he fails to act upon it (*Bend Sinister* 123). Thus Nabokov suggests that it is not enough merely to know that our consciousness is biased; one should at least have a faint idea of one's own inclinations if one wishes to avoid Hermann and Krug's fate.

Nabokov also dramatizes the unreliable and artificial nature of reality in *Bend Sinister* by robbing his characters of autonomy; the use of artifice reminds the reader that there is no objective reality. The narrator repeatedly makes his presence felt by calling Krug his “favorite character” and

by employing changes in narrative voices (135). The reality in *Bend Sinister* is full of shifting perspectives. Whereas the first chapter begins with Krug's first-person narrative, the second chapter switches to an omniscient third person narrator that observes Krug. The change in gaze, voice, and awareness between "my wife will die" and "Krug halted in the doorway" conveys that there are always at least two different angles to any given reality (*Bend Sinister* 7). The shifting identity of narrative voices makes it difficult for the reader to clearly distinguish between what is real and what is imagined in the novel (Clancy 95). The narrator also provides the reader with multiple versions of the story; after describing Krug's meeting with Paduk, the narrator interrupts, "[N]o, it did not go on quite like that. In the first place Paduk was silent during most of the interview" (*Bend Sinister* 131). Nabokov even addresses Krug directly towards the end of the novel when he writes: "the echoing steps retreated. Silence. Now, at last, you may think" (202). By repeatedly disrupting the seemingly real world of *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov suggests that the world we live in, like Krug's world, is entirely dependent on human consciousness.

The biggest authorial intervention occurs at the end of the novel when Krug finds that he is a mere character at the whim of the narrator, and it is important for us to note that our position is not too different from Krug's; we, too, are at the whims of the universe and our own consciousness and will therefore never truly and objectively understand reality. Towards the end of *Bend Sinister*, the narrator shares that he "felt a pang of pity for Adam and slid towards him

along an inclined beam of pale light—causing instantaneous madness” (203). This madness opens Krug’s eyes to the “simple reality” that “he and his son and wife and everybody else are merely [Nabokov]’s whims,” that everything is “only absurd mirages, illusions oppressive to Krug during his brief spell of being” (*Bend Sinister* vii). Aware of the true nature of his existence, Krug cries, “[Y]ou silly people [...] what on earth are you afraid of? What does it all matter? Ridiculous! Same as those infantile pleasures—Olga and the boy taking part in some silly theatricals, she getting drowned, he losing his life or something in a railway accident. What on earth does it matter?” (*Bend Sinister* 206) The narrator even saves Krug from dying by suddenly putting an end to the novel, an artifice Nabokov describes as “slippery sophism, a play upon words” (210). However, Nabokov does not employ these extreme interventions solely to exercise his omnipotent power as the creator or even to take the easy way out. Instead, by using artifice to create a dream-like world where illusion and reality overlap, Nabokov invites the reader to compare his reality to that of Krug’s:

The origins of our existence are ultimately mysterious, remaining beyond the reach of the words we summon to define and describe. Hedged by the unknown surrounding us, we struggle, like Adam Krug, to peer beyond the limits of our condition, seeking to populate the terrifyingly empty spaces with our words and images. (Pifer 95)

By witnessing Krug’s lack of autonomy, we become aware of the possibility that our reality, too, is never

concrete, independent, and objective.

In the end, symbolism, unreliable narrators, and artifice in *Despair* and *Bend Sinister* show that life is a series of biased impressions and that every consciousness is necessarily singular. Each consciousness builds the individual's world, and this is why the unique nature of consciousness is crucial; there is no such thing as average reality because our subjective minds render it impossible for us to grasp the objective truth—if there is any at all. Both novels uphold the supremacy of the individual consciousness, no matter how imperfect it may be. Lastly, because each individual consciousness is unique, to ignore or suppress someone's consciousness is to wipe out his or her world and existence. Nabokov seems to speak directly through Ardalion in *Despair*: “in the whole world there are not, and cannot be, two men alike, however well you disguise them” (*Despair* 170). Nabokov defends every consciousness' singularity, and it is only the deranged or the evil—such as Hermann and Paduk—who believe in true doubles.

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